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ABSTRACT

The paper reviews the literature on special education placement for mildly handicapped students from a sociological perspective. Using J. Rosenbaum's framework for understanding the sociological implications of selection systems, which has been applied to curriculum and ability tracking, this paper extends the framework to another selection system, special education. The authors indicate that an understanding of the social processes in special education can help researchers: (1) identify implicit social issues, (2) establish a broader theoretical base, (3) provide new directions for educational research and policy, and (4) influence implementation of federal regulations. (CL)

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SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

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SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

Although special education is usually considered as an educational procedure, it is also a social selection procedure for allocating certain kinds of students into special classes. As reviewers of the literature on ability grouping and curriculum grouping have noted, these educational procedures have important social implications (Heyns, 1975; Hauser, Sewell, and Alwin, 1975; Rosenbaum, 1976, 1980). By analyzing the social implications of such educational practices, we can discover some of the inadvertent consequences of these practices.

Special education placement, unlike regular education placement, is not based on standardized criteria which purport to distinguish clear cut-off points. Children are placed in special education on a case-by-case basis, with evidence supported by classificatory and diagnostic testing data. But this very lack of clear criteria raises questions about the process, making it all the more important that we understand the selection process and the placements that result.

This paper addresses research which is relevant to mildly handicapped children such as educationally mentally handicapped (EMH), learning disability children (LD), or mildly behavior-disordered children (BD or ED). Researchers generally treat the severely handicapped as a distinct subgroup which employs clearly documented differential teaching methodology (Mercer, 1974).

The literature on special education placement focused on two different questions: 1) the literature of the 1960's focused on the selection criteria and composition of special education classes; and 2) since the passage of the All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law, PL-94-142, enacted in 1977, the focus has been on the process of placement.

The first question addresses class composition, "Who are in special education classes?" This literature casts serious doubts on the validity of placement according to classificatory and diagnostic criteria. Examination of sociological variables suggest an over-representation of ethnic, racial, and lower-class groups.

In recent years, researchers have dramatically shifted their focus from "who" to "how." The new question is, "How are children placed in special education programs."

We contend that both questions are vital to the understanding of special education selection. We suggest, however, that the first question--who is placed in these classes--must not get lost or obscured by the law's emphasis on "how."

Who Are in Special Education Classes?

In 1968, Dunn, a prominent special educator argued that a "better education than special education placement is needed for the socio-culturally deprived children with mild learning problems who have been labeled educable mentally retarded" (Dunn, 1968, p. 5).

When researchers examined the composition of special education classes, the findings suggest an over-representation of ethnic, racial and social class backgrounds (Amira, Abramoutz, and Somes-Schwartz, 1977; Mercer, 1970, 1974; Sarason and Doris, 1979). For example, Mercer (1970) found that the percentage of minority children (particularly Spanish-speaking children) from 35 counties in California was often two to three times the comparable number in the total population.

Christoplos (1973) criticizes the tendency of educators who establish selection criteria and then find evidence to justify it. He contends that the process is similar to that described by William Ryan by Blaming the Victim (1972):

After an individual is found to have a problem, evidence is gathered to document the ways the individual is responsible for the problem. The process of identifying the differences between the "problem" child and the norm, itself accentuates these differences and creates stigma.

How Are Children Placed in Special Education Classes?

Since the passage of federal legislation, the focus of placement problems has shifted from who is placed to how they are placed. The legal aspects have turned placement issues into examining the regulations, procedures, and the structures formed under PL 94-142.

Presently, by legal mandate, the referral and placement process is overseen by a committee which includes at least one member of the evaluation team of the school, the child's teacher, the parents, and other individuals at the discretion of the parent or public agency. The procedures and the specifications for placement are complex and fraught with problems. One survey found that placement team members are neither fully aware of their placement team duties nor in agreement about actual goals or individual role responsibility (Yoshida, Maxwell, & Kaufman, 1979). Furthermore, the goals of the placement team also differ from the stated goals of the state educational agency.

Recent educational research has investigated the role and participation of the parents in the referral and placement process. Since the parents' consent must be obtained prior to testing, the parents can legally participate in every stage of the process. Parents' contributions and impact are potentially strong in theory. The conference would seem to be an ideal means of exchanging information and planning between school and home.

However, a study of these meetings finds that parent-professional interactions fall short of achieving these goals (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull & Curry, 1980). The researchers had three conclusions:

First, the meetings were judged too short for accurate information sharing; some lasted as little as six minutes.

Second, the special education personnel was typically observed taking the initiative to present the already developed case to the parent, who was primarily a listener at the conference. In 81% of the observed conferences, the other professionals were also passive and not directly addressed until it was their turn to report their findings. Only once in the fourteen conferences were the plans changed by parent input. These findings strongly indicate that the IEP meeting is not a decision-making instrument, but rather it is simply a ritual for informing parents of the school recommendation.

Third, an unexpected finding was the positive reaction reported by all participants in a follow-up questionnaire. Apparently even the parents felt satisfied with this process although they had little input into the decision.

Other studies also find that parents have generally not exercised their rights to participate actively in the educational planning for their children. Yoshida and Gottlieb (1977) found that parents acted as passive observers to gain knowledge of the team decisions and information during the IEP conference. Again, very few parents took an active role in planning and forming suggestions to be incorporated into the educational plan. Furthermore, another survey of special education professionals found that a majority felt that parent participation should be limited (Yoshida, Fenton, Daugman, & Maxwell, 1978). Although they felt that the parents were helpful in gathering information relevant to the case, they also felt that parental contributions to curriculum or placement planning were not beneficial.

Another survey of 130 participants in 27 IEP conferences in Southeastern Michigan compared the perceived importance of conference parti-

cipants before and after the meeting. The correlations were not significant. For instance, principals and parents were ranked high in importance prior to the meeting, but actually made few contributions. This body of research points to the consistent finding that the parental role is viewed as more powerful than is in fact the case.

The problem is not merely due to unassertive or inarticulate parents. Lawyers who represent special education children report that educators often respond negatively and defensively to their questions. As one Massachusetts lawyer stated, "The school appears to be a locked system. I get the impression that every question is viewed as an attack on the educator's competence" (Blosten, 1979). In addition, parents and non-school personnel report confusion in understanding professional jargon that educators use (Dembinski & Mauseir, 1977). This effectively blocks even well-educated parents and their legal representatives from understanding what is happening. Finally, Holland (1980) also notes other extraneous influences affect placement decisions: available programs, financial resources, and geographical proximity of special education services.

Implications

This paper is intended to stimulate a reassessment of special education placement for the mildly-handicapped student. In the present political climate, we face impending budget cuts of programs which respond to PL 94-142. These budgetary changes will force the school system to reconsider who is in special education classes. Most educators agree that special education will continue to serve the most severely handicapped chilren. It is possible that the definition of "severely

handicapped" will be subjected to close scrutiny because of budgetary limitations. Budget cuts will require us to reconsider the advantages and disadvantages of the selection system of the mildly handicapped.

Unlike the regular education system, special education has a legal structure to monitor the selection system. This legal structure offers an objective framework for student placement, as distinguished from the ability and curriculum group placements in regular classrooms. In complying with federal regulations, however, the process has sometimes become ritualized and mechanical.

A placement and program decision is usually made prior to the IEP meeting by school personnel and is presented to the parents for acceptance or rejection. Since most parents are looking for guidance to decide the best program for their child, the recommendation is accepted without question. Thus, the IEP meeting is sometimes like a show put on for the parents to demonstrate why the school is doing what they are doing.

A predetermined recommendation is not responsive to parental concerns. For example, parents often worry that their child will adopt poor behavior from his special classroom peers. While there is some evidence to suggest that this concern is valid, the school personnel tend to gloss over the question and minimize the concern.

Similarly, the process is often managed to resist parent input. If the parents are more questioning than the school anticipated, or if a lawyer or parent advocate is present, the school personnel become more defensive, throw up obstacles to open decision-making, and close ranks to present a united front, against the opposition.

Most disturbing, parents and team members in IEP conferences often don't realize that the conference goals were not achieved. The federal

regulations were intended to open channels and provide structures for balanced decisions. When the committee evaluates the child's needs, the diagnosis should not be formed until there is adequate information assessing the child's strengths and weaknesses. Finally, the IEP conferences should encourage open debate and consider alternatives to special class placement before accepting decisions too quickly or too easily.

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